Unit .14

Session .01

A Rebellious People Receive Mercy

Scripture

Jonah 1:1-4,17; 2:10—3:5,10; 4:1,8-11

1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: **2** "Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because their evil has come up before me." **3** Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from the LORD's presence. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the LORD's presence. **4** But the LORD threw a great wind onto the sea, and such a great storm arose on the sea that the ship threatened to break apart. ... **17** The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. ... **10** Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. **1** The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: **2** "Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach the message that I tell you." **3** Jonah got up and went to Nineveh according to the LORD's command. Now Nineveh was an extremely great city, a three-day walk. **4** Jonah set out on the first day of his walk in the city and proclaimed, "In forty days Nineveh will be demolished!" **5** Then the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least. ... **10** God saw their actions—that they had turned from their evil ways—so God relented from the disaster he had threatened them with. And he did not do it. ... **1** Jonah was greatly displeased and became furious. ... **8** As the sun was rising, God appointed a scorching east wind. The sun beat down on Jonah's head so much that he almost fainted, and he wanted to die. He said, "It's better for me to die than to live."**9** Then God asked Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "Yes, it's right!" he replied. "I'm angry enough to die!"**10** So the LORD said, "You cared about the plant, which you did not labor over and did not grow. It appeared in a night and perished in a night. **11** But may I not care about the great city of Nineveh, which has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot distinguish between their right and their left, as well as many animals?"

Intro Options

Main Point:
God's grace can extend to even those we consider enemies.

Option 1

Ask your students to imagine a leader whose people have rejected him. It could be a coach whose team has rejected him, a chairwoman whose businesspeople won't listen to her, or a ruler whose people have rejected her. Have them come up with a list of possible reasons why that leader might still try to win back his or her people. Keep track of that list of motives.

Split your kids into groups. Assign each group one of the motivations from the earlier list. Have each group prepare a short skit depicting a leader pursuing his or her people from the motivation they've been assigned. Let them show their skits.

Afterward, tell them today's lesson will be about God pursuing a rebellious people: Israelites, Gentiles, and us! Go back through the skits with their motives and talk about which ones might be like God's pursuit of us and which ones are not. Why and why not?

Option 2

Break your students up into groups of two or three. Tell them they'll be creating either a skit or a short story. The last line of the story/skit must be, "I'm giving up on you." They may set the skit in whatever setting and situation they wish: boyfriend and girlfriend in the present day, businesspeople in the 1850s, a coach and athlete in the future, or a Jedi Master giving up on her padawan a long time ago in a galaxy far far away. Wherever and whenever they set it, they should prepare either a skit or short story leading up to the line. Once everyone has had time to prepare their skit or story, let them share it with the group.

Optional: if time and creativity permit, have them repeat the same procedure, but this time with the last line of the story being, "I'm never going to give up on you."

Debrief by pointing out what it took to get people to quit on others. Why do people give up on each other nowadays? If they did the optional skit, why do people not quit on others? Does God give up on us? How does his not doing so demonstrate how great he is? Lead into the lesson by talking about how we'll see today that God continually pursues his people and by pointing out how beautiful and reassuring this truth is.

TEACHING PLAN

The story of Jonah is perhaps one of the most well-known and often told stories of the Bible. And while Jonah played a vital role in his own story, the main character of the story is God and the plot is His unwavering pursuit of both Jonah and the Ninevites whom Jonah despised.

Read Jonah 1:1-4,17.

When the word of God came to Jonah to preach a message to Nineveh, he ran. This command of God came to his ears, but his heart's response was rebellion—he did not want to do what God commanded him to do. Jonah, like every Ninevite, was an idolater. His status as an Israelite, his calling as a prophet, his previous acts of obedience—none of these made it easy for him to obey this command of God to go to a people who were the enemy of God's people. Jonah would rather leave his home and sail for the ends of the earth than obey God by preaching salvation to a wicked people who would gladly kill him and all of his peers.

Jonah was a sinner. Jonah was in need of a Savior. And God was able to remind Jonah of these truths before he arrived at Nineveh. When it comes to rebelling against God, both Jonah and the Ninevites were guilty and in need of the pursuit of God's grace.

- **Has God ever called you to go somewhere or do something you found difficult to obey? What did He ask of you? How did you respond?**
- **After reading about Jonah's response, what do you think you can do to avoid making the same mistake in your own life?**

Apparently, the belly of a great fish is a fine place to reevaluate your priorities, because it served as that kind of environment for Jonah. Ironically, Jonah found himself in the exact same position as the Ninevites. He was disobedient, living in the middle of God's discipline, and he needed to repent and ask for forgiveness. He had to, in a sense, preach the message to himself that God had given him for the Ninevites. And when he applied the message to himself, he was thankful for the same gracious character of God in his own life. Jonah 2:7 recorded part of Jonah's prayer from inside the fish.

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 40, DDG)

God is Merciful

Mercy refers to God's compassion and is often expressed in God withholding something, such as punishment for sin (Eph. 2:4-5; Titus 3:5). Both mercy and grace are undeserved, meaning humanity can do nothing to earn God's mercy and grace. If one could, then it would no longer be the free gift of mercy or grace.

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God's grace can extend to even those we consider enemies.

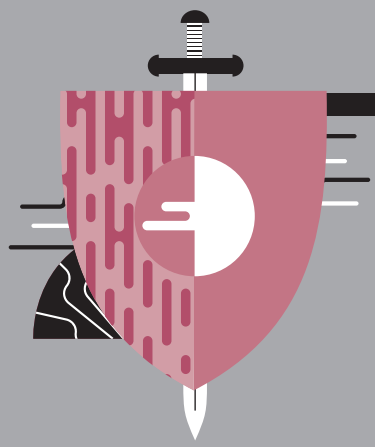
Jonah 1

1-4. For years, Jonah had faithfully served God as a prophet in Israel. But suddenly, God's new message came and the immediate response we see from Jonah was one of disobedience. But why was Jonah so adamantly against God's command? Jonah's disobedience wasn't because he was afraid that he would travel all the way to Nineveh, preach to an evil people, and that no one would repent; his fear was tied to believing that God would actually spare such evil people.

Nineveh was known for its vicious and violent ways. They would kill and skin their enemies, then display the bodies as a warning to any who would oppose them. In many ways the Assyrians were the Israelites' sworn enemy. To obey God's will in this situation would not only have been dangerous to Jonah's own well-being, but to his reputation as the prophet of Israel as well. What would the Israelites say if Jonah went to extend grace to a people who had killed their fathers and children? Though Jonah had a track record of obeying many of God's previous commands, he had now come face to face with a command that he was unwilling to follow.

Jonah knew God well enough to realize God was gracious, compassionate, and full of mercy. Furthermore, he knew God was giving the Ninevites forty days of warning, inviting them to repent. Jonah could see how this would play out—he would go to Nineveh, he would speak the word of the Lord, the people would repent, and God would forgive them. No judgment. No destruction. Jonah's hatred for the Ninevites bound him from sharing the message of God with them.

But just as God was unwilling to give up on the Ninevites, He was also unwilling to let Jonah go his own way. God pursued Jonah even as the prophet ran, and the means of that pursuit was a mighty storm. The storm God "hurled" into the sea was so terrible that the hardened sailors suddenly turned very religious. There are no atheists on ships in a God-sized storm!



In Defense (p. 42, DDG)

Lots of people, upon reading or hearing the book of Jonah, get caught up with the likelihood of some of the particular details within the story—mainly that of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish and being kept alive during that time. Because of that, some wonder if the story of Jonah is actually a true, historic account of the prophet or more of an allegory or parable used to illustrate biblical truth. Two things to consider in this discussion: 1) one can't outright reject the historic nature of these events solely on the grounds that miracles don't happen. There are many reasons to believe in the existence of miracles in light of the Christian worldview and the historic record preserved in the Bible. To say these things can't take place is a much stronger claim than saying they didn't take place—either of which is going to require a tremendous amount of support to uphold. 2) It is important to note that Jesus believed that Jonah was a historic figure who lived out these historic events (Matt. 12:39-41). In fact, Jesus makes the connection between the physical experience of Jonah inside the fish with His own imminent experiencing of being inside the tomb for three days and nights. Many argue that such a connection only makes sense if Jonah's experience was real history.

TEACHING PLAN

After Jonah repented, it is as if the story started over again. Jonah was again given the same command to go and preach to Nineveh.

Read Jonah 2:10–3:5,10.

Maybe Jonah thought after all that he had been through that God would let him off the hook and move on to another messenger. Yet, in His mercy, God invited Jonah a second time to participate in the great work that He would do in Nineveh. God is a God of second chances, and His forgiveness and mercy should motivate us toward greater obedience. When God once again spoke to Jonah, His command was the same: Get up. Go to Nineveh and preach. God and His command did not change; Jonah, instead, had to change.

- **Do you think it was difficult for Jonah to find himself in need of the same repentance God sought from the Ninevites? Why or why not?**
- **When have you disobeyed a call from God but later received a second chance to obey and participate in His work?**

When Jonah finally arrived, there were no clever illustrations or sermon props he used. Instead, he simply pronounced God's judgment. Miraculously, the message was incredibly effective. Jonah went throughout the city preaching his message. Afterward, people in Nineveh had been cut to the core by the proclamation of their destruction and turned to God. As evidence of their repentance, the king declared a state of extreme fasting. The city turned to God with all their might, even including their animals in their fast.

- **Does it surprise you that Jonah's simple message was effective? Why or why not?**

Read Jonah 4:1,8-11.

Jonah would be a nice and tidy book if it wrapped up at the end of chapter 3. The rebellious prophet repented, the wicked city repented. Tie it up with a nice neat bow. But rarely is that the story of our lives. Often times by God's grace, we repent and obey, but the hardness and the sinfulness of our hearts that we thought were dealt with comes roaring back. We often find ourselves dealing with the same sin patterns once again. This is seen in Jonah, but we also see God's continued pursuit of him. God wasn't simply trying to get Jonah to accomplish a missionary task; He was after Jonah's heart.

Jonah's story isn't unlike our own. However, in our scenario, we play the role of the enemies of God. In fact, our story is that we were the enemies of God, but God appointed another Messenger to come to us to preach repentance. Someone better than Jonah came and declared God's message of repentance and forgiveness. This Messenger bent Himself fully to the will of God, though it cost Him His life. He was also swallowed up for three days and three nights, not by a fish, but by the grave. Then He emerged victorious. Jesus is the better Jonah, and we are the enemies who have been granted forgiveness because of Him.

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God's grace can extend to even those we consider enemies.

Jonah 3–4

3:4-5. This was the sermon delivered by Jonah: "In forty days Nineveh will be demolished!" Only five words in Hebrew. Yet, at this simple message, the city of Nineveh repented—rich and poor, young and old. Even the king stepped down from his throne, removed his robe, and repented. While the words were few, two critical components were clear. First, "Nineveh will be demolished"—God had seen the depth of their wickedness and He would no longer bear it. Judgment would come. The justice of God demanded that sin be punished. But Jonah also said, "In forty days." There was time to repent. Though the city deserved immediate destruction, God revealed that He's not only just but also merciful and forgiving. Mercy was needed because judgment was coming. God hates sin and seeks to destroy it, and at the same time, He loves sinners and seeks to reconcile them to himself. He is slow to anger; He is quick to forgive.

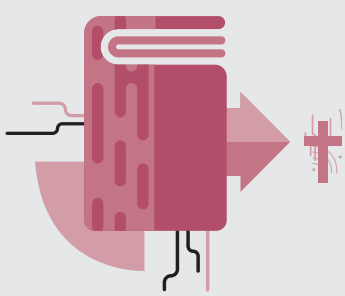
4:8-11. Throughout the Book of Jonah, God sovereignly used various pieces of creation to work on Jonah's heart. When Jonah fled to Tarshish, God hurled a storm upon the sea that tossed the ship so that it could no longer sail. When lots were cast to determine who was guilty, the decision belonged to the Lord, and Jonah was exposed in his disobedience. While Jonah was sinking in the ocean, God a fish to swim over to Jonah and swallow him. He wasn't chewed or digested but remained alive for three days and nights until God commanded the fish to vomit him on a beach. In Jonah's anger, God raised up a plant and provided shade. Then, He appointed a worm to kill the plant. The astonishing thing is that all of creation fully submitted to God's Word, except Jonah. All of creation was available to God as He loved, disciplined, and pursued the heart of Jonah. This is no less true today. Every element of this world is available to God and at His disposal as He works out His will in the lives of His people—whether storms and winds or traffic jams and airport delays or sickness and tragedies.

Activity

Split your kids into multiple groups. I'd suggest 3-5 students into each group. Announce to them that the church wants them to put on a "wax museum." Each group is going to do three scenes on one of the main points from the lesson. Assign each group one of the points (e.g., that God pursues a rebellious people, or God's grace extends even to those we consider enemies). They should then assemble three scenes that they will depict as "wax figures." First, they'll show that point from a scene in Jonah's life; second, they'll show that point from a scene in Jesus' life; third, they'll show that point from a possible scene in their own lives. For example, students might have a scene depicting God telling Jonah to go after the Ninevites while Jonah crosses his arms in denial; second, Jesus might be speaking to a group of hardened Jews; third, the students might depict themselves trying to address some peers who are against Christianity. Give them some time to prep their scenes, then have them show them to the rest of the group. Point out any good points, like tenderness toward the lost, and novel approaches to evangelism or love.

(p. 41, DDG) Christ Connection

Jonah was a prophet who rejected God's call, ran from his enemies, and eventually obeyed grudgingly. Jesus followed God's call, loved His enemies, and obeyed joyfully (Hebrews 12:2). While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.



A REBELLIOUS PEOPLE RECEIVE MERCY

Jonah 1:1–4, 17; 2:10–3:5, 10; 4:1, 8–11

A REBELLIOUS PEOPLE RECEIVE MERCY

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JESUS CONNECTION

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LIFEWISE QUALITY

COMPASSION – Recognizing the suffering of others and taking action to help.

HEAD

List everyone to whom God demonstrated compassion in the story of Jonah.

How did Jonah show a lack of compassion to those same people?

HEART

God is merciful and shows compassion even when we don't deserve it. Is compassion easy for you to share or do you tend to want to reserve it for those you think "deserve" it?

Why might recognizing God's compassion for us make it easier to show compassion to others?

HANDS

Compassion means seeing suffering and doing what you can to help. But suffering isn't always big and obvious. Think about the people in your family, school or community who might be hurting in small ways and brainstorm ways you can help them. Commit to acting on those ideas this week.